

## **Honored friends of the Vjosa and of my country,**

Thank you for your invitation and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before the European Parliament.

I was ready to travel even on foot from Albania to raise this most distressing problem facing the inhabitants of my region, but fortunately you were kind enough to spare me the physical strain and make a flight possible for me.

I was even prepared to sleep outside, but you all were kind enough to book a hotel for me. I was ready to beg for a hearing, any hearing, but you made possible for me an audience in the Temple of Democracy, Liberty, and Justice itself.

But who am I? I am to speak before you, and am to tell you about what has happened, and with reverence I ask for your help under God.

My name is Trifon Murataj, I come from Albania: born, raised, and educated in the village of Kute and by the shores of the Vjosa. I was born and was reared in the house of my great grandfather, who himself, may he rest in peace, inherited it from his great-grandfather. It was there that my grandfather was born and died, a man who returned from working in faraway Australia dreaming of Kute and the Vjosa.

There my father was born and there he died. A man who, when he had nothing to feed me, would travel the fields to gather wild cabbage, which truth be told was flavorful, but when I ate it daily would become unbearable.

I had very few things during my childhood: no food, no clothes, no books, and no dreams (since those were limited by the circumstances of that time). But God helped that father and his son (the very man speaking before you today) and gave us in abundance the pleasure of swimming plentifully in the Vjosa, and of running through the valleys and fields, which truth be told were in and of themselves very pleasant. But if I had only had a pair of shoes they would have been much more enjoyable.

I was a wild child and I loved the Vjosa very much, so much so that I left no corner unexplored. I have been endangered twice by the river: the first time when I was a child, only five years old. The adults saved me from drowning and the Vjosa did her part as well, her crystal waters floating me rather than sinking me.

The second time she showed herself to be much more unforgiving but still generous, saving three lives after warning us sternly until our last seconds of breath. When we prayed for help underwater, the Vjosa carried above her waters my twelve-year-old son, my 24-year-old cousin, and myself, the person who is fortunate enough to stand here today and tell you this story. I am convinced that the Vjosa heard God above and heeded his calls to save us because she knew that we would reciprocate her kindness when she, in turn, would ask us to save her in the future. I could never have imagined that I would work to save a river, let alone the mighty Vjosa.

My honored friends,

This is not mythology: it is truth.

Today I come before you in the name of my compatriots to save our Vjosa: the Vjosa of all Albanians; the Vjosa of the Old Continent, as we call it; and the only Vjosa on the planet.

Trust me when I say that she is a special river bearing a special name. If you wish to be lulled to sleep by her lullaby go and sleep by her banks, and you shall hear her song. If you wish to gaze into a mirror, go to her waters and look upon your reflection. If you wish to visit the kingdom of Nature herself, come to the Vjosa, who will welcome you and will not disappoint you. Trust me, I myself have tried all of which I am speaking, as have my compatriots and colleagues.

Friends and saviors of the Vjosa: our river is in grave danger.

They want to destroy her. They want to defile her form from one of elegance and natural beauty to something engorged and distorted, to be widened and narrowed at the will of these barbarians of nature, these soulless haters of life, these repressors of our liberties, thieves of our properties, and killers of our dreams.

Do you know who “they” are? They are the corrupted, the soulless, the disdainful, the oligarchs. Those who are against the beauty of nature. Those who oppose our right to have natural wealth. Those who are murdering both our past and our future. Those who are forcing us to emigrate by destroying our property.

Yet do you know who these people are concretely? They are those we have chosen with our own vote

They are those who govern us. They are those who want to enrich themselves by demolishing our wealth, who want to become owners of our natural beauty by destroying the lands left to us by our ancestors. Those who want to rule despotically by stealing the future of our children.

This which I am telling you is not my opinion. Everything you have heard from me here are the thoughts, valuations, and opinions of every inhabitant of the region from which I come. I assure you that each and every one of us mutually agrees with these points. They are worried as much as I am. They too seek help from you as I am. We do not want to leave our Albania, our Vjosa, or our Kuta. We want to live as our ancestors have, perhaps even better than they did, but always working on our land and swimming in our river.

This is why I am here today in the name of all of us inhabitants of the area: to plead for your help in saving the Vjosa; to save the land, to save Kuta; to save the lives of 3000 villagers; to save her flora, fauna, and spirit.

To save the only wild river left in Europe.

To save the future of our children.

May God bless your European family, which we hope to be a part of in the future together with the Vjosa.

Thank you for your attention,

Trifon Murataj